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BUILDING YOUR RESILIENCY



A GUIDE TO BOUNCING BACK FROM LIFE'S
CHALLENGES AND TAKING ON THE WORLD

BY BRETT H. MCKAY AND KATE R. MCKAY



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INTRODUCTION

Building Your Resiliency

How did you do on the [hardihood quiz](#)? (see end of section for the quiz) Not so hot? Well join the club.

There are a lot of virtues lacking in the current generation of men, but I think an argument can be made that our lack of resiliency is the most critical.

And I say that as a man who has himself struggled to live this virtue.

In law school, I engaged in a pathetic routine each semester. After finishing my finals, I would initially feel pretty confident in how I did. But then I would sit and think about the exams in detail, remembering questions that I missed, issues that I failed to raise.

My confidence would quickly evaporate, replaced by a sense of utter doom and despair. I would become convinced that I had gotten a C or even failed the test. I wouldn't get my grades back for several weeks, but I would spend that time in a state my wife called "logging out," which, as the name suggests, involved me laying on the couch like a depressed log.

When my grades would finally come in, I would be relieved to find I hadn't flunked out, Kate would chide me for my irrational behavior, and I would swear that I wouldn't waste my time doing *that* again. But come finals time the next semester, the The Log Man would make another appearance.

I was in serious need of some resiliency. And I still am. So I decided to do some research on the subject and share it with others who might be struggling to be resilient too.

What is Resiliency?

Studies have shown that boosting your resilience increases your resistance to stress and can greatly lower your chances of becoming depressed. It can

even reduce the chances of getting PTSD. You may not be living in a war zone, but the trials of life, even the weight of many little setbacks, can leave a man feeling shell-shocked.

We all have times when life makes us want to crawl into a hole; resiliency is what helps us dust ourselves off and climb back into the saddle instead. But just what is resiliency, anyway?

Resiliency is a quality that helps us both *act* and *react* in appropriate and productive ways. Let's take a look at both of these areas.

Resiliency as a Reactive Quality

Resiliency is the ability to face setbacks, failures, crises, and pain (both emotional and physical) with confidence and courage.

It is the ability to **quickly bounce back** from our trials and tragedies.

It's the quality that keeps us from giving up, even when the going gets rough. It's the ability to stick with something through thick and thin and the power to overcome the temptation to bail out when things stop being easy.

Resilient men don't let their worry about the future, about things that may or may not come to pass keep them in a funk. And they don't let mistakes from their past eat them up inside. Instead, they concentrate on the present and the things that they do have control over.

Resilient men take personal responsibility for their actions. They don't whine and blame others. And yet they do not blame themselves so much that shame and guilt paralyze them from moving forward and trying again.

We see resiliency in the guy who gets cancer but remains optimistic and upbeat. In the man who gets a divorce, but doesn't get bitter. In the guy who is fired from his prestigious job, but is able to make the best of becoming a stay-at-home dad. He's [the rock](#) who keeps his composure when bad news hits and is able to take care of his loved ones when everything's going to pot. He's both strong *and* flexible.

Resiliency is a quality that not only helps with the big crises of life, but also allows you to weather the mundane daily annoyances that threaten to grind out your vitality.

Resilient is the man who can face his annoying co-worker without anger, argue with his wife without exploding, and have his kid disappoint him without flipping out.

Resiliency as an Active Quality

While we most often think of resiliency as a quality that helps us *react* to challenges, resiliency is also essential to the *proactive* aspects of our lives. It is the virtue that allows us to face the world *head on* like daring adventurers, to strike out into the unknown like courageous explorers. It is the quality that enables us to take risks, to reach out to others, and to live deeply and powerfully.

Without resiliency we forever dwell on our setbacks instead of making progress in our lives. The hurt from our past disappointments (or even the hurt we *imagine* could befall us) is so debilitating that we cannot muster up the courage and desire to take chances and seize opportunities; we're afraid of experiencing pain and embarrassment. Without resiliency we become content to [play it small](#); we hide from the world, keeping ourselves from hurt but also removing our chances of joy, excitement, and satisfaction. The fear of trying something and failing looms large in our minds. Yet we ignore the even bigger failure—the failure to make an attempt, to *try* and to *risk*.

Every man wants to know the secret of the man who is able to walk up to any woman and strike up a conversation. Who can saunter into his boss' office and ask for a raise. Who takes the trip everyone else says is crazy. Their secret is resilience. They've got a thick skin; they don't walk around feeling like the next disappointment might be a fatal blow, a wound to their ego and happiness that will take forever to recover from.

They're not crippled by fear of embarrassment. They know that if they get rejected, if things don't work out, they'll hardly miss a beat; they know

they won't shrivel up like a daisy; they'll simply take the setback in stride and keep on truckin. They don't shrink from forming relationships in fear of the potential pain of a break-up; they know that pain is a possibility but they are confident in their ability to manage it and move on.

Do you want to be a man that lives with gusto, seeing the world as your oyster instead of a minefield? Well, good news: It's possible for every man to develop iron-clad resiliency.

While some men may have been born more resilient than others, or had parents that helped them develop this quality, it, like all virtues, is like a muscle that can be strengthened by regular exercise.

In this short eBook, we'll give you the tools you need to strengthen and develop your resiliency so you can bounce back from whatever life throws at you and be the man you want to be.

SELF-MEASURING QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HARDIHOOD

Taken from *How to Choose the Right Vocation*, published in 1917

- Have I “stout and persistent courage” or am I only courageous under excitement or stimulation of some kind?
- Do I have to screw up my courage to meet difficult situations?
- Am I conscious of being mentally and physically rugged?
- Do I challenge hardships or do I try to avoid hardships and difficulties by following “the line of least resistance?”
- Do I hesitate about trying out my powers in unused directions that demand fortitude or courage?
- Have I the courage to blaze new lines of action when success seems reasonably certain or do I wait until others have occupied the “strategic positions?”
- Does the element of personal risk in sports, travel, adventures or vocations count greatly with me?
- Does that which is unknown or untried affright or allure me?

- As a child, did heroic deeds thrill me and was it my ambition to emulate them or was I an afraid to-dive youngster?
- Am I attracted or repelled by the hazardousness of life-saving callings?
- Am I resolute and clear-headed in the presence of imminent danger or do I quail or become panic-stricken?
- As boy or man, have I ever shown individual heroism or is my bravery always of the mass or mob kind?
- Do I struggle to master matters that test all of my resources?
- Can I stand and profit by severe criticism when I have been or seem to have been at fault?
- Do I, if necessary, court severe discipline as a preparatory course for a desired vocation or do I pamper myself and like to be coddled by others?
- Do I strive for personal efficiency, grasp at opportunities and recognize my right to advancement?
- Do I rebound quickly from defeat?
- Am I indifferent to supercilious fault-finding?
- Do I enjoy being in contests of fortitude and endurance and in intellectual combats?
- If I were a candidate for some elective office would defeat dishearten me or should I reckon each successive defeat as preparation for final victory?
- When confronted with unexpected difficulties in anything that I have undertaken, is my first impulse, or reaction, the desire to back down or to go ahead with greater energy than before?
- Do I stand by the presumption that I am to succeed, even when things look blackest?
- Have I a persistent resolution when once a careful judgment has been made?
- In making purchases—whether of neckties or machinery equipments—do I inspect the goods under consideration and form inde-

pendent opinion of their merits or am I influenced unconsciously in my decisions by what I think the salesman may think of me?

- Do I sometimes accept less than I know I should for services rendered because I lack the stamina to stand up for my rights?





CHAPTER 1

Avoiding Learned Helplessness and Changing Your Explanatory Style

Starting in 1967, [Dr. Martin Seligman](#) began a series of experiments involving 3 groups of dogs. The first group of dogs were given electric shocks, but were able to press a panel with their nose to make the shocks stop. The second group of dogs were given the shocks as well, but had no recourse to make them stop. The third group was the control and received no shocks.

The dogs in the first and third group recovered well from the experiment. But the dogs in the second group, those that had been helpless to stop the pain, developed symptoms similar to clinical depression.

In the second part of the experiment, the dogs were placed in an enclosed box separated by a low barrier over which they could see. When the shocks were administered, all the dogs had the opportunity to easily escape the pain by jumping over the partition, and this is what the dogs in the first and third group did. But the dogs in the second group, those which had previously learned that there was nothing they could do to escape the shocks, simply lay there whimpering and took it. **They had come to believe that nothing they did mattered; Dr. Seligman called this behavior “learned helplessness.”**

Similar experiments were repeated with other animals, babies, and adult humans, and the results were the same. **Once subjects had been exposed to a situation over which they had no control, they would continue to feel helpless, even in situations where they *did* have control.**

Learning Helplessness

You were an awesome boyfriend, but still got dumped or a wonderful husband who still got cheated on. You've always been a good person, but your father died when you were in college, while the jackasses out there still get to go on fishing trips with their dads. You put your heart and soul into your job, but got passed over for the promotion. You worked your butt off in [law school](#), but you still can't find a job.

When these kinds of things happen, you lose an important sense of control over your life; you stop believing you're the captain of your destiny. You followed the rules, but you still got screwed. You feel disillusioned, and it becomes easy to develop a jaded, passive "What's the point?" philosophy that informs all areas of your life.

But having such an experience doesn't guarantee that you'll develop "learned helplessness."

During his research, Seligman noticed a curious phenomena; in all the experiments, a consistent ratio emerged: 2/3 of the test subjects which had experienced a situation over which they had no control developed "learned helplessness," while the other third did not. They were able to see the helpless situation as an isolated event, and bounce back to proactively face future challenges.

Dr. Seligman wanted to know the secret of the 1/3 who felt helpless in one situation, but didn't carry this feeling over to new challenges. Why did the exact same events produce such different responses? The answer turned out to be something called *explanatory style*.

Explaining Explanatory Style

Dr. Seligman discovered that the difference between those who were able to bounce back and those who were susceptible to learned helplessness was rooted in the different ways people *explain* the things that happen to them.

Seligman argues that our interpretation of events can be broken down into three categories:

- Personalization (internal vs. external)
- Pervasiveness (specific vs. universal)
- Permanence: (temporary vs. permanent).

The authors of *[The Resilience Factor](#)* helpfully rename these categories in an easier to remember way and explain their meaning:

- Me/Not Me
- Always/Not Always
- Everything/Not Everything:
“A ‘Me, Always, Everything’ person automatically, reflexively believes that he caused the problem (me), that it is lasting and unchangeable (always), and that it will undermine all aspects of his life (everything). When problems arise, a “Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything person believes that other people or circumstances caused the problem (not me), that it is fleeting and changeable (not always), and that it will not affect much of his life (not everything).”

For obvious reasons, studies have shown that those with a “Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything” explanatory style are the most optimistic, while **those with a “Me, Always, Everything” explanatory style are prone to pessimism and depression.** Once MAE’s fail at something, they are susceptible to experiencing “learned helplessness” for a long time and across many areas of their life.

The effect of your explanatory style not just on your resiliency but on your whole life cannot be overstated. Those with a pessimistic, “Me, Always, Everything” explanatory style are more prone to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and paralyzing inertia in the face of setbacks. Those with an optimistic, Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything style, on the other hand, experience improved health and happiness and significantly more success in the workplace, at school, and on the playing field.

An Example of Explanatory Style

Let's examine one situation and see how a Me, Always, Everything man reacts compared to a Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything man.

Len gets fired from his job:

- If Len tends to a Me, Always, Everything thinking style then he might explain this event by saying, "I'm such an incompetent accountant. I was always out of my league at the office (Me). I'll never be able to find another good job. (Always). My wife is probably going to leave me now. Man, my life is so screwed up. (Everything)."
- Now if Len has a Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything explanatory style, then he might explain this event by saying, "I got fired because there just isn't very much work for me to do anymore, and the company is trying to be more efficient. (Not Me). The economy is really making holding a job difficult. But things will eventually turn around. (Not Always). The job wasn't a good fit for me anyway; I really wasn't using my true talents. At least I have a good wife at home to help me through this (Not Everything)."

Flexible Optimism

None of us use the same explanatory style with everything in our lives. For instance, while optimistic people tend to use a Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything approach when dealing with bad events, they use the opposite style when good things happen. And vice versa for pessimistic people. And we can give into "learned helplessness" even when we know it's not our fault—it's not "Me" but it is "Always" and "Everything." I.e., you worked your butt off in grad school but you can't find a job because the job market is crap. It's not your fault but you find yourself feeling like things will never get better and responding passively to *everything* in your life.

Also, while a “Me, Always, Everything” approach can cause a person significant problems, always using a “Not Me, Not Always, Not Everything” style can also be unhealthy. Because sometimes it is your fault. You can slough off all of your personal responsibility for failures to keep from getting depressed, but you’ll also keep yourself from ever being successful in life. **You can admit it’s your fault without going farther and believing the problem is *pervasive* and *permanent*.**

Finally, sometimes you’re right to be pessimistic. A bit of pessimism keeps you vigilant and prevents you from taking foolish risks. There’s no need to be blindly optimistic; Pollyanna was never an icon of manliness.

So the key is not to wear rose-colored glasses all the time, but to be what Seligman calls a “[flexible optimist](#).” This means seeing the world accurately, reacting appropriately—using the right explanatory style at the right time—and not letting pessimism obscure the things you legitimately have going for you.

Relearning Your ABC’s

So the bad news is that having a pessimistic explanatory style can have a big negative impact on your life. The good news is that you can change your explanatory style for the better. And it’s as easy as ABC. How we encounter and react to life’s setbacks can be broken down into categories first outlined by Dr. Albert Ellis:

A. Adversity. We face a setback or challenge.

B. Beliefs. Our thoughts, feelings, and interpretation of the setback. These beliefs lead to:

C. Consequences. How we act because of our beliefs about the setback.

So we can’t change the A. But we can change the B, which will lead to a new C. **It’s not adversity itself that creates our reactions, but our *beliefs***

about our [adversity](#). If your beliefs have been leading to negative, non-resilient responses that are dragging you down, you have to short circuit this reaction by changing your beliefs about challenges.

Here's an example of a pessimistic ABC in action:

Adversity: James frequents a coffee shop because he has a crush on the girl at the register. He finally works up the courage to ask her out. But instead of saying yes, she turns him down.

Beliefs: James thinks: "Geez, I'm such a freakin loser. I'm not attractive and don't have anything to offer women. I'm never going to find a girlfriend."

Consequences: James alternates between feeling depressed and angry for the next week. He can't muster up the courage to ask another girl out for over a year.

James' beliefs about what happened led to an overly negative reaction. To get a better outcome, he needs to change his beliefs by *disputing* them.

Disputing Your Beliefs

Just because you have certain beliefs, even if you have held them for as long as you can remember, that doesn't make them true. False beliefs will limit your ability to get to the root of your problem and will limit the solutions you are able to come up with. If you have some beliefs that are sabotaging your resiliency, you need to dispute them, challenge them, and have an argument with yourself.

Dr. Seligman recommends judging your beliefs on 4 criteria. Let's take a look at them and explore how James could have reacted more resiliently to the rejection he received:

1. **Evidence.** What are the real facts in the situation? Does the evidence support your belief or vanquish it?

James could think, "I'm not a loser. I'm an Oxford scholar, I've done an Ironman, and I've got a great job at a prestigious law firm."

2. **Alternatives.** Pessimists have a tendency to latch onto the most dire of explanations for a bad event, ignoring more positive alternate explanations.

James could think, "Maybe she had a boyfriend and that's why she said no. Maybe she just got out of a bad relationship. It might have nothing to do with me personally at all."

3. **Implications.** When faced with a setback, pessimists have a tendency to jump to more and more catastrophic implications. But what are the chances of these implications really happening?

James could think, "Just because a girl at a coffee shop turned me down doesn't mean I'll never have a girlfriend. I've had a girlfriend before and I'll have one again."

4. **Usefulness.** Just because a belief is true, doesn't mean it's useful. Clinging to useless beliefs keeps you from working on the things that you actually can change about yourself.

James could think: "Yeah, I'm not that attractive. But I have a lot going for me otherwise. Girls like confidence, so what I really need to work on is coming off as more confident and self-assured. Thinking about my unattractiveness is sabotaging that."

Whenever faced with an ABC, practice disputing your beliefs; have a knock down drag out fight with yourself and figure out what's really going on. It may be beneficial to [journal it](#), as writing can help you sort through why you're feeling the way you are, and whether your beliefs are distorting what is really going on. It can also be helpful to have a spouse or trusted friend do the disputing for you. Tell them what you're upset about and have them

challenge you on your beliefs, asking you questions to figure out just how accurate your beliefs actually are.

While at first it will take some effort to stop in the midst of your negative reaction and work on disputing your beliefs, over time it will become natural and will help you respond appropriately, positively, proactively-and resiliently to your challenges.

Sources:

[*Learned Optimism*](#) by Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman

[*The Resilience Factor*](#) by Dr. Karen Reivich and Dr. Andrew Shatte

Resiliency Exercise No. 1

Think about a recent setback that you don't feel like you dealt with resiliently and write it down.

Setback/failure in life:

Now break down what happened according to the ABC model.

Adversity—This is the event that set off your reaction

Beliefs—This is what was going through your head when the event occurred. What were thinking when it happened?

Consequences—This is how you reacted to the event. How did you respond, what did you do?

Resiliency Exercise No. 2

Your beliefs lead directly to the consequences. So if you're unhappy with the consequences, you need to learn to change your beliefs about adversity. You do this by disputing your beliefs. You can practice this skill by using the four categories that Dr. Seligman suggests.

1. What evidence do you have to support your belief? What evidence do you have that contradicts your belief?

2. What are some possible alternative explanations for your setback? Put yourself in another person's shoes. Pretend you are a neutral observer. Look at the situation from a different angle.

3. What are the *real* implications of your failure? Pessimists have a tendency to jump to the worst possible conclusions. What's a more optimistic way to think about the implications of what happened?

4. Are your beliefs even useful? Is the belief really just holding you back? Is this type thinking helping you in any way?

Anytime you are faced with a setback, you can go through these questions and dispute your non-resilient beliefs. Eventually it will come naturally to you, and you'll be able to dispute your negative beliefs just as soon as they arise in your mind and in the midst of a setback.



CHAPTER 2

Taking Control of Your Life

“We lost 13 pilots in six months. And in nearly every case, the worst pilots died by their own stupidity.”

-Chuck Yeager

Among test pilots, Chuck Yeager’s attitude towards pilots who “augered in” was universal. In [*The Right Stuff*](#), Tom Wolfe relates how test pilots loved to talk about flying at every chance, and how the discussion would inevitably turn to why the latest pilot to have perished in an accident had done himself in. It was always the pilot’s fault. Even if a piece of equipment had malfunctioned, the consensus was that the pilot should have double-checked it before taking off. Nearly every death was caused by pilot error, plain and simple.

To the average joe, this might seem like a callous attitude, but when you’re going to a funeral every other week, burying a guy who’s doing the same job as you, you have to believe that you’re in control of your life, 100%. Otherwise, you’re never going to get into that cockpit again.

These men had the “right stuff.” Their unshakable belief in their ability to control their destiny set them apart from other men. You may not be flying planes, but you too can stop being a victim, strap into the cockpit, and take control of your life.

Feeling in Control: The Foundation of Your Resiliency

[In the previous chapter](#), we discussed an experiment in which dogs who had been given electric shocks and no recourse to stop the pain “learned helplessness.”

It was the experience of not being in control that left them depressed and defeated and sapped their resiliency.

The need to feel in control in our lives cannot be overstated. In [*Stumbling on Happiness*](#), Dr. Daniel Gilbert argues:

“Being effective—changing things, influencing things, making things happen—is one of the fundamental needs with which the human brain seems to be naturally endowed, and much of our behavior from infancy onward is simply an expression of this penchant for control...The fact is that human beings come into the world with a passion for control, they go out of the world the same way, and research suggests that if they lose their ability to control things at any point between their entrance and exit, they become unhappy, helpless, hopeless, and depressed. And occasionally dead.”

The dead part refers to a pair of studies done to test the link between feelings of control and health.

In the first study, the elderly residents of a nursing home were each given a houseplant and divided into two groups—the high control group and the low control group. The high control group was told that the plant’s care was in their hands while the plants in the low control group were taken care of by a staff member. The results at the end of the study were startling—30% of the members of the low control group had died, compared to only 15% of the members of the high control group.

A follow-up study garnered similar results. College students were paired with residents at another nursing home. One group of the elderly residents (the low control group) could not control when the students would come; the student would set the appointment date. The high control group was able to dictate when the students would visit. “After two months, the residents in the high control group were happier, healthier, more active, and taking fewer medications than those in the low control group.”

If feeling in control of a *houseplant* can prolong your life, imagine the effect that feeling in control of even bigger things can have on your happiness, confidence, and resiliency.

Having an Internal vs. External Locus of Control

In the 1950's, psychologist Julian Rotter theorized that much of human behavior can be explained by whether a person has an *internal or external locus of control*. Locus means “place” in Latin, so these categories denote whether a person is controlled by external or internal factors. Those with an external locus of control believe that their behavior is guided by fate, luck, and other external factors. Those with an internal locus of control believe that their behavior is guided by their own actions and decisions.

People don't fit into one extreme or the other, rather the two categories represent the opposite ends of a continuum.

Having an external or internal locus of control has a profound influence on behavior:

Those with an internal locus of control:

- Are confident that they can be successful.
- Tend to be leaders (leading those with an external locus of control).
- Exhibit greater control over their behavior.
- Seek to learn as much as they can.
- Take personal responsibility for their actions.
- Deal with challenge and stress better.
- Use challenges to come out stronger than before.
- Thrive in the midst of change.
- Are less likely to submit to authority.

Those with an external locus of control:

- Feel like they're a victim.

- Are quick to blame everyone but themselves.
- Want to be led by others.
- Avoid responsibility.
- Are more prone to stress, anxiety, and depression.

Those with an internal locus of control are achievement-oriented and more likely to find academic and professional success. Because they believe they're in control of their destiny, they're eager to tackle challenges, while those with an external locus of control are apt to say "Why bother? It doesn't matter what I do anyway."

Additionally, Dr. Siebert, author of the [*Resiliency Advantage*](#), argues that "both sets of beliefs are self-validating and self-fulfilling. People who believe that their fate is under the control of outside forces act in ways that confirm their beliefs. People who know they can do things to make their life better act in ways to confirm their beliefs."

There are online tests you can take ([here](#) and [here](#)) to get an idea of whether you have a more internal or external locus of control.

Stop Being a Victim and Take Control of Your Life

Men are more likely to have an internal locus of control than women, which perhaps explains why rhetoric about being the captains of our destiny has always deeply resonated with us. And I would personally argue that much of our current crisis in manhood can be traced to men shifting from that natural mode of behavior to handing control of their lives over to external forces. Everything today is not our fault but is rather the result of a disease, addiction, or chemical imbalance.

The good news is that while your upbringing shapes your locus of control, it is possible to change it and become more internal than external.

Rotter grounded his ideas about locus of control in something called "expectancy-value theory," which says that a person's likelihood of taking an action is dependent on how much the person values a particular out-

come and how much the person believes that taking the action will produce that outcome.

To put it in simple terms, and I hope this will be seared in every man's mind: **We blame others and play the victim when we don't believe that we can solve a problem ourselves.**

Non-resilient men play the "if only" game. These are the guys who claim that they would be the men they want to be.... "If only I had more time to exercise." "If only my wife didn't nag me so much." "If only my boss would stop being such an a-hole." Their happiness is put on hold as they wait for circumstances and people to change.

The truth is this: **people aren't going to change.** And if your happiness is contingent on them doing so, **you've just handed control of your life over to them.** If you let your co-workers/friends/girlfriend "make" you feel a certain way, you've stopped being an active agent in your life, and become a *victim*.

The resilient man understands that the only thing he can control is himself. Only he can change his circumstances and only he can control how he reacts to adversity.

Circumstances don't dictate your life-*you* dictate your life. The resilient man waits for no one to solve his problems; he is always actively trying to solve them himself.

Taking Control of Your Life By Strengthening Your Problem- Solving Abilities

So the key to taking control of your life is to strengthen your problem solving skills. As you do so, you will gain the confidence and the belief that you can tackle whatever challenges come your way.

To do this, Dr. Siebert suggests using and strengthening 3 different problem solving methods.

ANALYTICAL PROBLEM SOLVING

We as men should excel at this kind of problem solving. It involves using logic, analysis, and reason to come up with solutions. To apply these tools, Dr. Siebert recommends taking the following steps when faced with a problem:

1. **Get an accurate understanding of the problem.** Ask questions, research, observe. Get as much info about what's happening as you can.
2. **Ask yourself, "What do I want?"** What is your desired outcome?
3. **Come up with two or more potential solutions to the problem.** Weigh the pros and cons of each.
4. **Take action.** Pick a solution and throw yourself into carrying it out.
5. **Take stock of the effects of your action.** What's working? What isn't?
6. **Learn from the feedback you get.** Fine tune your approach to be more effective.
7. **Modify your efforts.**

Analytical problem solving is good to employ with a problem like getting your finances under control. If you feel like you're drowning, sit down, figure out what debt reduction plan you want to use, crunch some numbers, come up with a budget, etc.

PRACTICAL PROBLEM SOLVING

There are people who are book smart and people who are street smart. Ideally, you want to be both. Practical problem solvers don't get emotional when faced with a challenge. They don't get angry and focus on "Why me?" Research done on the survivors of extreme difficulties show that instead of fighting and arguing against the new reality, and trying to stop the change,

they fully embraced what was happening. You can shout, “This shouldn’t be happening!” all you want. But it *is* happening. And you have to deal with it.

Practical problem solvers immediately get to work on positive solutions. They choose action over words and feelings. And they plan for future challenges, understanding that if they’re prepared, they have nothing to fear.

CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

When it comes to resiliency, perhaps the most important problem-solving strength is the ability to be creative. Creative problem solvers can think outside the box, come up with solutions on the fly, and generate novel ideas that haven’t been tried before.

Creative problem-solving is so vital because so much of resiliency comes down to one’s ability to deal positively with change. And goodness know there are a lot of changes going on in the world. Resilient people plunge head first into new things, while non-resilient people have to be dragged kicking and screaming.

Non-resilient people base their happiness on stability—they set up a routine and never voluntarily leave their comfort zone. When they’re forced to deal with a new reality, their world falls apart, and they find it extremely difficult to bounce back. They try to wedge their old ways of doing things into a new situation. It’s like putting a round peg in a square hole, and yet still they miserably persist.

They can’t grasp the new reality because they don’t want to. They shut their eyes and it doesn’t matter what new information they’re presented with, they refuse to change their mind. “My kid is not taking drugs.” “My girlfriend is not cheating on me.” “My job is not going to be downsized.” These people are always the last to know. They refuse to believe the truth right in front of them, and when they’re finally faced with the indisputable facts, they absolutely go to pieces.

You look at companies today and there are those that have grasped what the changing technological landscape means for doing business, and there are those that keep trying to do business the way they did 30 years ago.

They're not going to survive. You can be like the people who 60 years ago said that TV wasn't going to hurt radio, or you can be the person that grasps the new reality and uses their creativity to remain relevant.

How do you become a creative problem-solver? The first key is curiosity.

Creative people maintain the same curiosity they had as children. You remember being a boy...exploring creeks, asking a ton of questions, tearing through book after book. Adults who retain this child-like curiosity are still fascinated with how things work and are always taking in new information about the world. They read. They ask questions. "What's going on?" "How are things shifting?" "How are other people feeling?" "What are they thinking about?"

Creative people are **open-minded** and constantly absorbing information. They let information flow into their brains and observe things without labeling and judging them as good or bad. They don't think things like, "That's a stupid idea." "Those people are crazy." "That's not how you should do things." "That culture is backwards."

This doesn't mean a creative person doesn't have opinions and believe certain things are right or wrong. It just means that they want to know how things work *just for the sake of knowing*; that all knowledge is good whether you agree with it or not. They file everything away in the belief that you never know when a fact is going to come in handy and something is going to give you an amazing insight.

When you saturate your mind with information and experiences, and let this knowledge swirl around in your cranium, things will just pop out of your unconscious. You'll be brushing your teeth and a new business idea will come to you.

Creative people understand that you never know where you're going to find inspiration, ideas, and solutions to your problems. But they do know those things won't be generated if you're forever stuck in the same routine, and your mind isn't being fed and nourished.

Watch new movies, travel, listen to music, read all sorts of books, visit museums, get out in nature, meet new people. You'll be looking at some

strange piece of art and all of a sudden the reason you've been fighting with your girlfriend will suddenly become clear.

Applying These Principles to Your Life

Do you feel like you're waiting for your ship to come in? Do you feel like you are a helpless cog in a machine? Are you waiting for other people to change so that you can be happy? Do you check your email 100 times a day hoping that an email will show up that will change your life?

Stop placing your fate in someone else's hands.

It's time to take control of your life. Instead of being the ship, be the captain that controls the ship.

Having a bunch of loose ends in your life is heavy psychological baggage. It's like an orchestra where everyone's playing a different piece. The music would be terrible. You have to step in as the conductor and get each instrument on the same page, all working together to create something beautiful.

Start by making a list of the things in your life that you're not happy with. Pick one of the problems and come up with a concrete plan of action on how you're going to tackle it. This simply means sitting down with a notebook and not getting back up again until you've figured out a solution, a few concrete steps you can take to solve the problem. And then you follow-through with your plan with absolutely no excuses. If there's really nothing you can do to change the situation, come up with a way that you can change your reaction to what's happening. Don't let other people dictate how you feel. Controlling your emotions and deciding how to feel on your own terms is one of the manliest and most satisfying accomplishments in life.

Once you successfully tackle one problem, your confidence in your problem-solving abilities will increase, your sense of being in control of your life will increase, your resiliency will be continually strengthened, and your confidence will be further enhanced. And the cycle will continue.

Your life is not fixed. It is malleable and it can be whatever you want it to be.

I know this is the part where people hope for an easy fix, but there's no solution outside of simply being proactive. *Doing* instead of waiting. So go and do my friends. Go and do.

Invictus

William Ernest Henley

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.*

Sources:

[*Stumbling on Happiness*](#) by Dr. Daniel Gilbert

[*Resiliency Advantage*](#) by Dr. Al Siebert

[*What Is Locus of Control*](#) by James Neill

Resiliency Exercise No. 3

Make a list of the problems in your life, all the things that are causing you stress or anxiety.

[illegible]

Now pick ONE problem and commit to solving it. Follow the steps above and spend some time coming up with a concrete plan of action on how you're going to handle it. When you've solved that problem, mark it off the list and choose another until they're all scratched off.



CHAPTER 3

Iceberg Ahead!

Have you ever reacted to something with an intensity of emotion that didn't seem to match the circumstances of the event? The logical part of your mind is telling you that's it's not that big of deal, but you still feel really angry/hurt/depressed/anxious, and you can't seem to turn off the emotion.

These kind of "overreactions" can leave us feeling pretty frustrated. They hurt our relationships and keep us from making progress in our lives. Not only do they lead us to dwell on things longer than we should, but we end up making poor decisions in this emotional state. These kinds of incongruous reactions keep us from responding resiliently to our problems.

So what causes these mismatched reactions? A collision with an iceberg, an iceberg *belief* to be precise. Water is pouring in your hull, but atop the deck you don't really understand what has happened. All you know is that you're sinking-fast.

What Is an Iceberg Belief?

According to the authors of [*The Resilience Factor*](#), this experience of a mismatched stimulus/reaction is "a sign you are being affected by an underlying belief-a deeply held belief about how the world ought to operate and how you feel you ought to operate within that world. ...These deeper motivations and values often drive us and determine how we respond to adversity...these underlying beliefs-or icebergs, as we call them- are usually outside our awareness, deep beneath the surface of our consciousness."

So iceberg beliefs are fixed and frozen ideas about the world that we hold deep within us. Drs. Reivich and Shatte offer these examples of iceberg beliefs:

“I should succeed at everything I put my mind to.”

“People must respect me at all times.”

“Women should be kind and supportive.”

“A man doesn’t let his emotions show.”

“Failure is a sign of weakness.”

“I must never give up.”

“Only weak people can’t solve their own problems.”

Here are some others I thought of:

“I never want to end up like my father.”

“The most important thing is to be well-liked.”

“Men are always competent in whatever they do.”

“A man never quits what he starts.”

Examples of Iceberg Scenarios

Let’s explore how these icebergs can affect you in real life by looking at some hypothetical scenarios:

Dan’s iceberg belief is, “People must respect me at all times.” As he’s driving to work, someone cuts him off. He spends the rest of the commute riding the guy’s ass, cursing, and flashing his high beams.

Jeff’s iceberg belief is “Manliness can be judged by how good you are with the ladies.” He approaches an attractive woman, and she totally blows him off. James feels deeply hurt and spends the rest of the week replaying the moment and feeling angry and depressed.

Joe’s iceberg belief is that “A man never quits what he starts.” His son Jeremy comes to him one night and tells him that he’s quitting the hockey team because he doesn’t enjoy it anymore. Joe becomes enraged at his son, telling him he’s a loser for giving up, and he’ll never amount to anything in life.

Where Do Icebergs Come From?

Iceberg beliefs can almost all be traced to the way you were brought up. If your dad was a super stoic guy, “Men don’t show emotion,” might be one of your icebergs. If your mom was Miss Manners, one of your iceberg beliefs might be: “People who are impolite are not worth knowing.”

Icebergs in Your Relationships

Icebergs can shipwreck our relationships. This is particularly true because we often have iceberg beliefs about gender roles, even ones we’re not conscious of. Have you have been beaten by a woman you were competing with in a game? Maybe you felt extra crappy about it, crappier than you’d feel if you had been beaten by a dude. You know it’s stupid to feel that way, but that emotional reaction is caused by an iceberg belief about how these encounters should go down.

We all have iceberg beliefs about how a man and how a woman should act, and when these beliefs are violated, we can have a very strong visceral reaction, and we can’t quite understand the intensity of our emotions.

Let’s say you just worked on a handyman project around the house. Or maybe you’re in charge of the finances in your relationship. And you do something wrong, even a little thing. Your wife sees the mistake, tries to pretend like it’s fine, but disappointment is written all over her face. You might feel really angry or defensive or really sulky and humiliated. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but your iceberg belief was that men always know what they’re doing, and so you feel way crappier than you should. And you probably take it out on your wife, becoming uber defensive and angry.

Note-this kind of thing can work both ways. The woman in your life may become really upset when you don’t live up to one of her icebergs beliefs. A lot of women have icebergs beliefs about men being strong and competent with everything. When you fail at something or otherwise come off as weak to them, it can create quite a visceral reaction in them. For example,

my wife thinks that the man should take care of haggling deals and be awesome at it. Unfortunately, I'm not. And when I fail to get us a bargain, she gets really angry with me.

The Problems Icebergs Can Cause

"Iceberg beliefs cause you to overexperience certain emotions and underexperience others. Emotionally resilient people feel it all...but they feel those emotions at the appropriate time and to the appropriate degree. Less resilient people tend to get stuck in one emotion, and that comprises their ability to respond productively to adversity."

-The Resilience Factor

There are 4 problems that the Drs. Reivich and Shatte believe can be caused by iceberg beliefs:

1. Iceberg beliefs can become activated at unexpected times, which leads to out-of-proportion emotions and reactions.
2. Their activation might lead to emotions and behaviors that, although not extreme, are mismatched to the situation.
3. Iceberg beliefs can become too rigid, which causes you to fall into the same emotional patterns over and over.
4. Contradictory iceberg beliefs can make it hard to make a decision.

The first 3 points are pretty self-explanatory, but let's take look at number 4. We can experience contradictory iceberg beliefs that confuse us and make decision-making difficult. You might have two iceberg beliefs: "A man should always follow his passion in life." and "A man takes care of his family." You're called into your boss' office and offered a promotion. You know you'll hate the job but it will be a lot more money to support your family. The colliding of these icebergs can make you feel paralyzed and anxious.

It's important to note that icebergs are not by necessity bad or good—they can be either, or both. “Integrity is the most important thing in life” is obviously a positive iceberg.” “I will never quit at anything,” has some definite positives for your life, but can be taken too far if you're not careful. “People cannot be trusted” is a mostly negative belief. So you have to do a cost/benefit analysis of which icebergs you want to keep and make work for you and which you want to work on melting away.

Why It's Hard to Melt Your Icebergs

You may say, well, this is good to know, I'll just snap out of my negative icebergs and melt them away. But it's not so easy, as we are all susceptible to a confirmation bias or what RF calls the **Velcro/Teflon Effect**. As you go about your life, you tend to filter out and ignore whatever doesn't support your iceberg beliefs while honing in on everything that does.

So Gary believes, “All women are untrustworthy and manipulative.” At the start of his relationship with Sarah, she tells him that she isn't looking to date anyone seriously. After a few weeks Gary tells Sarah that he wants to become more serious, and she tells him that they shouldn't see each other anymore because that's not what's she's looking for. Gary will seize on this snub, while ignoring what Sarah told him at the beginning of their relationship, and will declare that women are all a bunch of liars and Sarah just wanted him to take her out and pay for her meals. He may even seek out women who are untrustworthy and manipulative, to unconsciously confirm his bias. The mind can be a tricky thing.

Spotting Your Icebergs to Build Your Resilience

So it's hard to simply shut off your iceberg beliefs. But it's possible to stop yourself from colliding with them by spotting them before impact. By standing in your crow's nest and being vigilant, you can steer a smoother

course for yourself. The more you become aware of your icebergs, the more you can understand why you react the way you do, and the more power you will have to react to things appropriately and resiliently.

To start spotting your icebergs, think back to the last time you felt your reaction wasn't commensurate with the event that elicited it. Then start asking yourself some questions to get to the heart of why you felt the way you did. It helps to do this exercise in a journal or with some you deeply trust.

The Resilience Factor recommends asking the following “what” questions (why questions tend to make you defensive) to figure out the iceberg you hit:

What does that mean to me?

What is the most upsetting part of that for me?

What is the worst part of that for me?

What does that say about me?

What's so bad about that?

Use whichever questions make sense, in any order that makes sense.

Let's say Jason's wife Amanda says to him one night, “You know you seem to be drinking a lot after work lately. Maybe you should cut back some.” Jason blows up at her, yelling about how she's a controlling bitch and it's none of her damn business how much he drinks. James is taken aback by his reaction and works through what happened like this:

Question: So Amanda suggested you cut down on your drinking some, what's so bad about that?

Jason: I'm a grown man and I know how much alcohol I can handle. I don't need her watching over what I'm doing.

Question: What's so upsetting about her watching over what you're doing?

Jason: I feel like it means she doesn't trust me and doesn't think I have it under control.

Question: What's so bad about her not thinking that you're in control?

Jason: I felt like she was insinuating that I'm turning into an alcoholic.

Question: Why is that so upsetting to you?

Jason: Because my dad was an alcoholic bastard and I'm not like that. I'm not like him.

So Jason realized that his wife's comment had made him defensive because it touched on his fear of and commitment to never turning out like his dad.

When you do this exercise, you'll first come up with more visceral reasons for why you're feeling the way you are. You have to keep digging to get to the heart of the matter and spot your iceberg.

So quit rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic, and start steering a course to more resiliency.

Source:

[*The Resilience Factor*](#) by Dr. Karen Reivich and Dr. Andrew Shatte

Resiliency Exercise No. 4

Think about a recent situation where you overreacted and suspect an iceberg belief was to blame.

Describe what happened.

To figure out what iceberg belief was at work, pick 3 of these questions to ask yourself and answer the questions as honestly as you can:

- What does that mean to me?
- What is the most upsetting part of that for me?
- What is the worst part of that for me?
- What does that say about me?
- What is so bad about that?

1. What _____ ?

2. What _____ ?

3. What _____ ?



CHAPTER 4

Recognizing and Utilizing Your Signature Strengths

When we first introduced the topic of resiliency, we discussed how it is both a reactive and an *active* quality, a skill that helps you bounce back and *reach out*.

Today's discussion will center on the active aspect of resiliency and the path to gaining the confidence to take risks and embrace change.

Anchoring Your Resiliency in Your Authentic Self

When your self-esteem and sense of self-worth is tied to other people, your job, or any other external factors, your confidence is subject to every wind of change and lacks real stability. Any time these external factors change, your happiness and confidence go with it. Your emotional fortitude goes up and down like a roller coaster.

Tying your self-concept to external factors also keeps you from embracing adventure and approaching the world like a courageous explorer. If you base your self-concept on external things, any changes in those things will throw you for a loop, create anxiety, and compel you to cling as tightly as you can to the status quo. You become desperate to keep your life just the way it is and can't handle change. You avoid traveling, moving, changing jobs, and getting into relationships because these steps alter the environment on which you've based your self-concept, leaving you feeling lost and out of control

The key to active resiliency is to build your self-concept not on a *constructed* self, but on an *authentic* self, not on external things, but on the inner, personal strengths that make you unique as a man. Your unique strengths are your special tools that will allow you to build a happy and fulfilling life. Understanding what tools you possess can give you the confidence that you'll be able to face any challenge that comes your way.

While we can't predict the future, we can have confidence in our ability to deal with whatever happens.

Basing your self-concept on your personal strengths allows your resiliency to remain strong wherever you go and whatever happens to you.

Think of it this way, you can either live in a fort, with your only gun in the turret, or you can strap your arsenal to yourself and take it anywhere you go. The resilient man is the guerrilla warrior of life.

Finding Your Character Strengths

Those with some knowledge of psychology will probably be familiar with the “DSM”— the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The DSM classifies and lists all the psychological disorders recognized by the American Psychiatric Association.

Drs. Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson are pioneers in the field of *positive* psychology. Believing that the field of psychology had spent too much time focusing on mental sickness instead of mental health, the two set out to create a list not of human disorders but of human strengths. These doctors set out to find virtues which had been prized almost universally across time, religion, and culture.

Their research yielded 6 core virtues. Under these virtues they listed 24 character strengths associated with each one. The *character strengths* were the avenues to living and attaining that virtue. Let's take a look at the list:

1. Wisdom and knowledge-cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
 - Creativity
 - Curiosity
 - Open-mindedness
 - Love of learning
 - Perspective
2. Courage-emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
 - Bravery
 - Persistence
 - Integrity
 - Vitality
3. Humanity-interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
 - Love
 - Kindness
 - Social Intelligence
4. Justice-civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
 - Citizenship
 - Fairness
 - Leadership
5. Temperance-strengths that protect against excess
 - Forgiveness and mercy
 - Humility/modesty
 - Prudence
 - Self-regulation (self-control)

6. Transcendence-strengths that forge connections to other people and the larger universe and provide meaning
 - Appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation)
 - Gratitude
 - Hope
 - Humor
 - Spirituality

Before you proceed further, take 20 minutes to take the VIA Survey of Character Strengths, available free at authentic happiness.org under the heading “Engagement Questionnaires.”

Did you take the test? Good. Now look over the list of strengths given in your results.

No test is perfect, and the taker can bias the results by choosing answers that don’t describe themselves as much as they describe the person they wish they were. So you want to double-check that the strengths listed are the real you. Seligman and Peterson recommend that you evaluate the authenticity of each strength with this criteria:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“This is the real me”).
- A feeling of excitement while displaying the strength, especially at first.
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced.
- A continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength.
- A sense of yearning to find ways to use it.
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped or dissuaded from its display.
- Joy, zest, enthusiasm, even ecstasy while using it.
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion when using the strength.
- The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around the strength.
- Intrinsic motivation to use the strength.

If a strength meets several of this criteria then it is truly one of your *signature strengths*. Signature strengths are “strengths of character that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises.” If a strength doesn’t meet any of those criteria, then they’re probably not one of your signature strengths.

Using Your Signature Strengths to Enhance Your Life and Resiliency

“Resiliency comes from a discovered self, not a constructed self. It comes from the gradual emergence of your unique, inborn abilities in a process called individuation. The better you become, the more unique you become as an individual—and it never ends.”

—Dr. Al Siebert

Now that you know what your signature strengths are, you can use them to enhance your life in three ways:

1. **Start basing your self-concept on your signature strengths, not on external things.** This isn’t some banal self-esteem affirmation where everyone is special just because. Your signature strengths are the things that truly make you unique and give you something special to offer the world. Allow yourself to feel confident in what you have to offer people. We may never be superheroes in the traditional sense, but you should look at your signature strengths like your unique “superpowers” that you can use as a force of good in the world.
2. **Embrace your signature strengths as the arsenal of tools you have to meet life’s challenges.** Unlike external things, your signature strengths can go anywhere and help you in any situation. If you get divorced, let go from your job, or move to a new place, your signature strengths are hanging around your shoulders like a bandoleer, ready to be employed to build something new. You are the Rambo of resiliency.

3. Exercising your signature strengths wherever and whenever you can.

The exercise of your signature strength is the path to true fulfillment, gratification, satisfaction, and happiness. Find ways to employ your signature strengths more often in your job, relationships, families, and faith. The more fulfilled you feel, the stronger you'll feel as a man, and the easier it will become to take risks and brush off setbacks.

Sources:

[*The Resiliency Advantage*](#) by Dr. Al Siebert

[*Character Strengths and Virtues*](#) by Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Christopher Peterson

[*Authentic Happiness*](#) by Dr. Martin Seligman

Resiliency Exercise No. 5

Take the Authentic Happiness test and then evaluate whether the results are the real you with the criteria given above. What are your *signature* strengths?

In each of these areas, write down three specific ways you can use your signature strengths more often:

At work:

1.

2.

3.

In your relationships:

1.

2.

3.

In your free time-hobbies, church, etc.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____





CHAPTER 5

Quit Catastrophizing

At the beginning of the book, I related how I became interested in the topic of resiliency while I was in law school. Every semester I had a tough time waiting for my final grades to come in and would spend the time engaged in what my wife called “logging out:” laying on the couch being depressed.

My log-like state was caused by thoughts that generally went like this:

“I’m going to fail Partnership Law. And if I fail that class my GPA will drop, and I’ll lose my scholarship. And then I’ll have to take out big loans to pay for school. And I won’t be ranked in the top ten anymore, so I won’t get a job at a big law firm. I won’t be able to get a job anywhere. Then I won’t be able to support my family, and I’ll be mired in debt.”

In short, I had myself believing that one bad grade would lead me on a non-stop train to the flophouse. I was engaging in what psychologists called “catastrophizing.”

This second to last chapter in this book isn’t too deep or complex, but it can teach you a quick and dirty trick to keep your thoughts from turning into a train wreck.

Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophizing essentially involves imagining and dwelling on the worst possible outcome of something. It’s basically overreacting and letting your thoughts run away to dire and highly unlikely scenarios. It’s the kind of thing that happens when you’re lying awake at three in the morning worried sick about the future and what’s going to happen to you.

Catastrophic thinking proceeds like a chain. One “what if” leads to another until you’re picturing yourself homeless on the street.

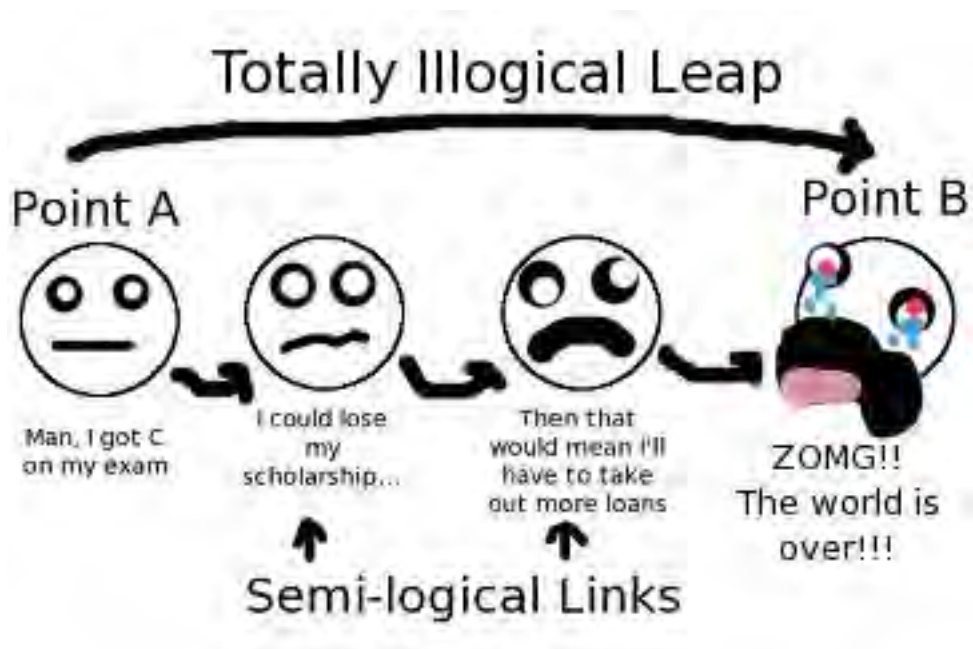
Catastrophizing can take two forms. It can spring from an actual event, like taking law school finals. Or it can simply be the product of gazing into the future and imagining one's life taking a terrible turn.

Why Is Catastrophic Thinking So Seductive?

Catastrophizing leads to pretty irrational conclusions. If you've ever indulged in it around other people, they probably told you to stop thinking so crazy. I know Kate continually tried to show me that my logging out was really illogical. But the catastrophe chain feels real to you, and it's hard to snap out of. Why?

While the leap all the way from point A to point B seems illogical, each little link in the chain doesn't seem that improbable. Your mind goes from each semi-logical link to the next, so by the time you've reached the end, the outcome seems entirely plausible.

Here's a scientific diagram I made to illustrate how this works:



Short-circuiting the Catastrophe Chain

The breakdown in logic that occurs when catastrophizing results from thinking that each link in the chain will definitely lead to the next. So you need to take a step back and look at what might reasonably, actually occur.

To do this, write down each step in your chain of catastrophic thoughts and challenge the plausibility of these events really happening.

Let's say that Brian was in charge of an important sales presentation for his company. A large contract is riding on it. But Brian forgets the USB stick that held his PowerPoint presentation. Humiliated, he stumbles through an off the cuff speech that clearly leaves his potential clients underwhelmed and unconvinced. As Brian sits at his desk after the presentation, his mind is reeling down Catastrophe Lane.

"The company is not going to get the contract because of my awful presentation. So my boss will fire me. I'll never find another job as good as this one. We won't be able to pay the mortgage, and we'll lose the house. If we lose the house, my wife is going to leave me."

Brian needs to break this chain of catastrophic thoughts by writing down each link in the chain and then assigning each link a number from 1-10 that represents the likelihood of that event occurring. A 10 means it will definitely happen; a 1 means it's nigh near impossible. At the same time, he thinks through some reasons why the event won't happen.

1. The company's not going to get the contract because of my awful presentation. (8)

Reasons it won't happen: It was a really bad presentation, but I still managed to get in a few key points on why they'd want to choose us. There's a chance the clients saw through the rough presentation and were able to understand the benefits of giving us the contract.

2. My boss is going to fire me. (6)

Reasons it won't happen: There was a ton riding on the company getting that contract, but it's not the end of the world. I made a huge mistake, but in the 5 years I've been with the company I've been their number one salesman and brought in more contracts than anyone else. I've been employee of the year twice. It would be really hard for them to replace me.

3. I'm never going to be able to find another job as good as this one. (3)

Reasons it won't happen: Yeah, the recession sucks, and it's hard to find a job but saying I'll never get as good of a job is dumb. Things will eventually turn around. I may have to work at less desirable jobs for awhile, but I'm prepared for that. I've got a stellar resume, and I can out hustle any guy out there. I'll push and push until I get a job that's even better than the one I have now.

4. We're not going to be able to pay the mortgage and we'll lose the house. (3)

Reasons it won't happen: Even just with Jane's salary we can still make the mortgage payments. We'll have to rein in our budget to Spartan levels, but we used to live like that and we can do it again.

5. If we lose the house, my wife is going to leave me. (1)

Reasons it won't happen: The relationship between Jane and I is beyond solid. We've been through much harder things than losing a house. She's already proven that she'll stick with me through thick and thin.

Hopefully in making this list and looking at the real probability of these things happening, Brian could see how quickly the logic of the chain unraveled as it went along. Just the act of putting your thoughts on paper

and generating reasons for why things won't happen that way will significantly clear your head, calm you down, and boost your confidence.

Come Up with a List of Proactive Steps to Take

We're prone to catastrophizing when we feel like **we don't have control over what's going to happen to us**. So another key to battling catastrophic thoughts is generating a list of things you can do to keep your worst case scenarios from coming true. You'll feel far more calm and confident when you have a plan in place, **any kind of plan at all**.

So Brian would make a list like this:

- Call up client, apologize for botched presentation, and ask if their team wouldn't mind me taking them to lunch to talk about a few things that didn't get covered in the presentation.
- Don't wait for the boss to come talk to me. Apologize sincerely to him, remind him of past accomplishments, and pledge to work 110% to make up for this mistake. Tell him I will hit the ground running to bring in new business.
- Update resume and get it in tip top shape so it's ready to go in case I am fired.

After you make the list, go to work taking those next steps. Taking action will make you feel in control and far better than a log.

Resiliency Exercise No. 5

The next time you are experiencing catastrophic thoughts, write down the thought chain running through your mind. Assign each link in the chain a number from 1-10 that represents the likelihood of that event occurring. A 10 means it will definitely happen; a 1 means it's nigh near impossible. At the same time, think through some reasons why the event won't happen.

First link _____

Likelihood of this happening (on scale of 1-10) _____

Reasons that it won't happen _____

Second link _____

Likelihood of this happening (on scale of 1-10) _____

Reasons that it won't happen _____

Third link _____

Likelihood of this happening (on scale of 1-10) _____

Reasons that it won't happen _____

Fourth link _____

Likelihood of this happening (on scale of 1-10) _____

Reasons that it won't happen _____

Fifth link _____

Likelihood of this happening (on scale of 1-10) _____

Reasons that it won't happen _____



CHAPTER 6

Building Your Children's Resiliency

Much of how you think and cope with challenges solidified way back when you were a kid and thus transforming those thinking patterns now is a difficult task.

While you can't go back and change your childhood, you can play a huge role in shaping the resiliency of your children and give them this vital leg up in life. A resilient spirit is one of the greatest gifts you can give your kids. It is a skill that will help them do better in school and work, have healthier relationships, and live a happier, and maybe even longer life. It's the key to helping them reach their potential: while talent is important, studies have shown that optimistic kids will rise above their potential while pessimistic kids will fall below it.

In this last chapter, we reviewed some of the principles we have previously discussed, talk about how they apply to children, and outline some additional things that educators and parents need to know about boosting kids' resiliency. But first, let's talk about what's handicapping the resiliency of today's generation of children.

The Self-Esteem Movement and the Weakening of Children's Resiliency

There's no shortage of hand wringing these days about the coddling of kids and the dangers of overzealous "helicopter parents." This concern over kids "getting soft" is easy for some to dismiss as just another spin on an age old criticism leveled by each and every generation ("Back in my day Sonny...").

But the worry that today's kids are coddled-overpraised and under-worked-is not without legitimacy. The adoption of the "self-esteem movement" into school curriculum has been well-documented, and its negative effect on kids' resiliency has been studied and proven by psychologists.

The "self-esteem movement" took off in the 1960s. With the Depression and World War behind us and the economy booming, an emphasis on human choice emerged, not just in the marketplace, but in the cultural ideal that each individual was able to shape his or her personality and destiny. The greater one's sense of self, the happier the self, the farther you'd go.

In 1969, psychologist Nathaniel Brandon published a very influential paper called "The Psychology of Self-Esteem" in which he argued that "feelings of self-esteem were the key to success in life." Brandon's ideas were misinterpreted and then institutionalized when a task force, charged by the California state legislature, formulated a set of recommendations entitled, "Toward a State of Esteem." The report argued that low self-esteem caused a variety of ills from academic failure to teen pregnancy and that teaching self-esteem in schools would be a "social vaccine" to inoculate kids from these problems. It recommended that every school district in California strive for the "the promotion of self-esteem...as a clearly stated goal, integrated into its total curriculum and informing all of its policies and operations" and that "course work in self-esteem should be required for credentials..for all educators."

Other states and schools were swept up into the self-esteem movement and incorporated self-esteem boosting exercises into their curriculum and programs. These exercises were designed to make students *feel good* about themselves, under the belief that these good feelings would then beget all sorts of success for the students.

However, true self-esteem actually has two components-*feeling good* and *doing well*. And the self-esteem movement got their order mixed up. While the California report posited that low self-esteem *causes* problems like teen pregnancy and welfare dependence, studies have shown that the opposite is true; low self-esteem is the *consequence*, not the cause, of such behavior.

Thus you can't start with the "feeling good" and have it lead to doing well. It happens the other way around. Feeling good, and true self-esteem, naturally follow from doing well. You can't pump kids full of self-esteem—it's something they have to earn for themselves.

By sticking the cart before the horse, the well-meaning self-esteem movement has actually hurt children's self-worth and resiliency. Dr. Martin Seligman, who has studied the issue extensively, argues:

"By emphasizing how a child *feels*, at the expense of what the child *does*—mastery, persistence, overcoming frustration and boredom, and meeting challenge—parents and teachers are making this generation of children more vulnerable to depression."

Seligman points out the irony that during the period we've been focused most intently on boosting kids' self-esteem, levels of childhood sadness, pessimism, and depression have risen to unprecedented levels. We're clearly tackling the problem the wrong way.

If educators and parents truly want to boost their children's self-esteem, then the key is to teach kids the life skills and principles they need to be successful, and the self-esteem will naturally follow from their accomplishments. Let's discuss some of the ways this can be done.

The Origins of Children's Explanatory Style

As we explained in Chapter 1, your explanatory style is how you typically explain the events that happen to you. When faced with setbacks, pessimistic people fall into a Me/Always/Everything style. Their problems are always their fault and are permanent and pervasive. Optimistic people explain bad events with a Not Me/Not Always/Not Everything approach.

Kids as young as eight have already developed their explanatory style. What factors shape how they explain the world and what happens to them? There are three factors.

Their parents' explanatory style. Explanatory style is not genetic, but it does get passed down in a big way. Kids have a lot of “why” questions and they listen intently to the things their parents say to figure out the answers and how the world works. If you're constantly using a Me/Always/Everything approach, your kids are going to adopt it.

Mom is actually the one who has by far the biggest effect on her children's explanatory style. A child with a pessimistic mom will very likely turn into a pessimistic adult. This is because of the amount of time mom spends with her kids each day; if you're a stay-at-home dad, then you're the one they're watching.

Teachers' and parents' criticism. How a parent or teacher criticizes a child can have a big effect on his or her explanatory style. Adults cultivate a pessimistic explanatory style when they tell children that their problems are permanent and pervasive instead of temporary and specific. This is the difference between a teacher telling a student he failed a test because “You didn't study hard enough” versus “You're just not good at math.”

Interestingly, girls tend to hear more permanent and pervasive criticism from their teachers than boys do. Girls typically behave in class while boys are more rowdy; thus, when a boy makes a mistake, the teacher chalks it up to him not paying attention; when a girl makes a mistake, the teacher is left saying something like, “I guess you just aren't motivated to learn.” Dr. Seligman posits that this early training may be why women suffer more depression later in life than men; they develop a pessimistic explanatory style as a child and carry it into adulthood.

Environment/Crisis in Upbringing. Factors like a chaotic upbringing, seemingly unchangeable poverty, and the loss of a parent, ingrain in children that bad events are permanent and pervasive, an idea they can carry over to all setbacks they experience.

Shaping an Optimistic Explanatory Style

So if your kids are learning their explanatory style from you (sobering, right?), what can you do to help them think more optimistically?

Of course, the number one thing is to model a positive style yourself. Your kid is watching you all the time. Additionally-

Criticize behavior, not character. Holding your kid accountable for what they do is crucial, but *how* you go about it is very important. Criticism of children's character, of their self, teaches them that their problem or fault is permanent and pervasive. This breeds passivity as the child will feel like there's nothing he or she can do to change. But criticizing *behavior* teaches them that the problem is temporary and limited in nature; it's solvable and something they can work to change and overcome.

Dr. Seligman provides these examples to illustrate the difference between criticizing character versus behavior:

- "Tammy, what's wrong with you? You are always such a monster!" vs. "Tammy you are really misbehaving today. I don't like it at all."
- "You are a bad boy." vs. "You tease your sister too much."
- "She never likes to play with other kids. She's so shy." vs. "She has a hard time joining groups of kids."
- "You are not athletic." vs. "You have to work harder to keep your eye on watching the ball meet the bat."
- "You kids are so selfish." vs. "You kids must share more."
- "Another C-minus? I guess you just aren't an A student." vs. "Another C- minus? You need to spend more time on your studies."
- "This room is a pig sty! You are such a slob!" vs. "This room is a pig sty. You need to start picking up after yourself."

PS-What goes for how you criticize your kid, carries over to how you criticize your spouse. Remember, your child is watching and modeling your behavior.

Teach your children their ABC's. In Chapter 1, we talked about the ABC's of resiliency. A is for adversity, B is for beliefs, and C is for consequences. It's not the adversities themselves that create consequences, but our *beliefs* about those adversities. This is a crucial thing to teach your kids. Parents often concentrate on the A and the C- asking their kids what happened and how they are feeling. But they also need to help their children discover the beliefs behind their feelings. Ask them questions about *why* they're feeling the way they are and help them see how their B's have led to their C's.

Teach your children how to dispute their negative thoughts. If your child's beliefs about their adversities are inaccurate and overly negative, help him or her to generate alternatives to how they're currently viewing things. Tell them to act like a detective gathering evidence for and against their interpretation of what is going on. Encourage them to look at the issue from different angles and put themselves in the other person's shoes. If they're catastrophizing, take them through the exercise outlined in Chapter 5.

Let Them Fail

When parents see their kids hurting, whether physically or emotionally, the natural tendency is to swoop in and make them feel better, to take the pain away.

By and large this is a normal and healthy impulse; children are vulnerable and need their parents to care for and protect them.

But pain also serves a valuable purpose in every person's life, both young and old. It teaches us about things to avoid, shows us when we've made mistakes, and shapes our future behavior. Pain can be a teacher and without it we can't progress.

Thus the parental impulse to stop all of a child's hurt can be misplaced and can actually stand in the way of a child's growth and the building of their resiliency. Solving *all* of your children's problems takes away their pain in the short term, but impedes their *ultimate* happiness.

Children need to try things on their own, fail at them, and experience negative emotions like sadness and frustration. They need to learn to persist in the face of failure. Without failure and persistence, there's no mastery (the feeling of being in control and knowing that taking certain actions get specific results). And without mastery, there's no self-esteem and no resiliency.

Give Unconditional Love and Conditional Praise

At the same time that the self-esteem movement was taking off, the idea of “unconditional positive regard” was also entering the public consciousness. Coined by Carl Rogers, it's the idea that complete acceptance and support, no matter what a person did, constitutes the foundation of effective psychotherapy.

This term was popularized in the culture as “unconditional love,” a term quite familiar to us today, but one that outside of religious discourse was not common until the 60s. When it comes to kids, it's an idea with some merit. When building your children's resiliency, you want to encourage mastery and prevent helplessness. And creating a safe, loving environment is indeed an effective way to help your child learn mastery. For a child to feel secure in exploring and taking chances, he or she must feel safe. An environment of positive regard, free of fear, creates an atmosphere where a child feels confident in striking out and trying new things.

But *unconditional* positive regard can dissolve your child's resiliency.

In Chapter 1, we discussed the phenomena of *learned helplessness*. When dogs were given shocks that they couldn't do anything to avoid, they learned helplessness, becoming passive and depressed even when given tasks they *could* control.

But learned helplessness is not just the result of uncontrollable negative events, it can also be caused by *uncontrollable positive events*. Dr. Seligman explains:

“Unconditional positive regard is just that-unconditional, that is, not contingent on anything your child does. This distinction cannot be glossed over. . . . When a person or an animal receives good events noncontingently- nickels fall out of the slot machine regardless of what the person does, food that is delivered regardless of what the animal does, praise that rains down regardless of whether a child actually succeeded-learned helplessness develops. . . . Recipients of noncontingent good events do not become depressed like recipients of noncontingent bad events, but they do become passive and lethargic. Even worse, they have trouble learning that they are effective, seeing later on that their actions work, once they regain mastery. A rat, for example, that first learns it can get food regardless of what side of a maze it goes to has inordinate trouble later on learning to go to the correct side when food becomes available only on one side.”

When a child is rewarded and praised no matter what he does, he comes to see that positive attention is outside of his control and not contingent on good behavior or success. This saps his motivation to try and challenge himself. Additionally, when you praise kids enthusiastically for things they know they didn't do well, the value of your praise diminishes. So if your kid struck out all season in little league and you keep saying, “You did so awesome out there!” The kid knows you're lying, and the next time you praise him for something, even if you mean it, he's not going to believe it. It erodes his trust in you.

So there seems to be a dilemma here: on the one hand creating positive regard boosts resiliency by giving children the safety to explore, while on the other hand, too much positive regard diminishes resiliency by teaching a child helplessness. The balance can be found in *unconditionally* providing your child with “love, affection, warmth, and ebullience,” but doling out praise *conditionally*. Praise your child when they have success, not simply to stop their hurt or make them feel better. Seligman also argues that you need to *grade* your praise, that is, let the praise fit the accomplishment-a

little praise for putting one's socks away, gushing praise for bringing home straight A's.

In short, give unconditional love, and conditional rewards and praise.

Internal Locus of Control

In Chapter 2, we discussed how important having an internal vs external locus of control is when it comes to resiliency. Much of our locus of control takes form in childhood. So how can you help your child feel less like a victim and more in control of his life?

A study done in 1967 by Stanley Coopersmith showed that parents who gave their kids the most rules and limits had children with the highest self-esteem, while those who gave their kids the most freedom had kids with the lowest self-esteem. Kids want limits, and they're essential to their healthy progress.

Giving your child consistent limits, rewards, and discipline is one key in shaping an internal locus of control. People with an internal locus of control believe that by doing x, they can get z; they see a correlation between action and consequences. Consistent parenting ingrains these kinds of connections in your child's mind. Good behavior leads to reward. Bad behavior leads to punishment. Promise a reward for an accomplishment, and give it to your child if and only if they attain it. Set a rule and punishment, and if the rule is broken, follow through on the exact punishment promised, every time.

In experiments with animals, when the animals were given a "safety signal," a beep before a punishment was doled out, the animals were able to deal with the punishment. But when the punishments could come at any time, and were not preceded by a signal, the animals became highly anxious and withdrawn. They had no control and no pattern to set their expectations by. So make sure child knows why you're punishing him and be sure the punishment fits the crime. And try not to "lose it" on them when they haven't really done anything wrong, and you're just having a bad day.

Encourage Exploration and Curiosity

Finally, encouraging your child's curiosity is one of the best things you can do for his or her resiliency. As we discussed in Chapter 2, curious people are open-minded, they want to know more about the world and about other people. This curiosity strengthens their resiliency because it makes them excellent problem solvers and aces at inter- personal relationships.

So don't stifle your kids' curiosity, even if they're annoying and peppering you with a slew of questions. Answer their questions and encourage them to learn more. Give them experiences, whether in travel, museums, or the great outdoors that lets them explore to their hearts' content. Give them toys that are more open-ended and require active, imaginative play. If you're an educator, don't pour knowledge into the kids you teach, but help them figure out things for themselves.

Sources:

[*The Optimistic Child*](#) by Dr. Martin Seligman

[*Resiliency Advantage*](#) by Dr. Al Siebert

[*The Resilience Factor*](#) by Dr. Karen Reivich and Dr. Andrew Shatte

